Online Project Planning Tools

With the growth in the Internet, online tools are becoming more common and easier to use. Online project planning tools usually have free versions and can make project planning run more smoothly for teams during CE.

What are online project planning tools?

The online project planning tools listed below are set up as wiki-based websites. A wiki is an online tool that allows users to edit and change web content easily and without knowledge of Internet coding languages. It can also be considered a "live" document: multiple people can be viewing and editing the same document at the same time. It's the online version of a group of people sitting in a room and creating or editing a document together.

Online project planning tools typically also offer storage for files the entire group may need to access, as well as additional tools that vary by provider. They give a range of options to grant access and editing capabilities to specific people and the public. This varies by provider.

Would using an online project planning tool benefit your team?

There are many possible benefits to using an online project planning tool, including:

⇨ **Easy communication.** Project Supervisors and members will be able to post comments, announcements, or messages to everyone in their task force or team quickly and easily. Individual and group task lists can also be created so that everyone knows what they need to work on at any given time.

⇨ **Storing files and documents.** Any document that the team may need (such as donation letters, flyers, press releases, etc.) can be stored online. Instead of sending the document repeatedly as an attachment, any member of the team can access it quickly and easily through the site. This also means that members will not have to worry about storing files on flash drives or host site computers.

⇨ **Group editing.** When creating documents (such as donation letters, flyers, etc.), a working draft can be posted on the site. Members can comment on or directly edit the documents so that the knowledge, wisdom, and perspective of each group member can be utilized.

⇨ **Involving and communicating with partners.** Since the sites are set up so that anyone can be invited to join, this means that any partners you may be working with can be more easily involved. Communication with partners can also be easier since they can have ready access to the website while members are serving at their primary service sites.

Using these tools may not be as helpful for every team or service project. The benefits of using one of these tools are more likely to be maximized if:

⇨ Your team or service project is large.

⇨ Your members' service sites are spread over a large geographical distance, or your team does not work closely together on a daily basis.

⇨ Members will have limited time daily or weekly to work on the project and may be working on it at different times (or at the same time in different places).

⇨ All of your members will have access to the site on a regular basis.

⇨ All of your Project Supervisors and members are comfortable using Internet tools.

<u>Online Project Planning Tools to Try</u>

Each of the tools below works differently. It will take some time and effort to familiarize yourself with the specific tool you are using. Below is some basic information about a few of the tools. There are other online project planning tools that are not described here, but these were chosen because they offer free versions while still offering a wide variety of tools. It may be helpful to set up a test site to fully explore how each tool works.

FMYI

⇨ **Address:** http://www.fmyi.com

⇨ **The Basics:** FMYI is designed specifically for project planning and set up to resemble social networking sites. Each individual's homepage lists the work groups, tasks, and messages they are associated with. Specific work groups (or task forces) can be given their own pages ("workspaces" on FMYI) where they can work together. Your website is only available to those you invite.

⇨ **Capabilities:** FMYI allows users to send messages to each other, generate group and individual task lists, store files, and share links. Individuals can also set up a profile similar to that of a social networking site where they can keep others updated on what they're working on.

⇨ **Benefits:** FMYI does not require any familiarity with Internet coding languages or even general knowledge on setting up a website. It organizes everything for you into one template. The workspaces themselves are very useful for groups because they are each given the same full set of tools (task list, messages, files, etc.). The site administrator can change the access and capabilities of individual users for different sections of the site. For instance, if a workspace is created for a task force working to publicize the service project, the members of that task force can be given full editing capabilities for the content of that workspace while the other members of the team are only allowed to view the content.

⇨ **Challenges:** FMYI's interface can be challenging to get accustomed to, and there is not a lot of flexibility in site organization. Some of the most useful features of FMYI are only available through paid subscription, which can make organizing the site a challenge.

⇨ **Best for:** Situations where the site administrator (usually the Project Supervisor) is less familiar with setting up a website. Teams where everyone is very comfortable using and exploring Internet tools and/or social networking tools.

Google Sites

⇨ **Address:** http://sites.google.com

⇨ **The Basics:** Google Sites is not designed specifically to be used as a project planning tool, so it is set up more like a traditional website or blog. Websites can be set to be made public or by invitation only. Each individual webpage can be set up for a variety of purposes that are easily customizable.

⇨ **Capabilities:** Google Sites offers task lists, commenting on each page, announcements, file storage, and the option of setting up a "dashboard" page, which pulls together several different small applications (or gadgets) to be easily accessible from one page. It also automatically creates a site map so that you can find anything you want easily.

⇨ **Benefits:** Google Sites offers a great deal of flexibility in setting up your website. You can create individual pages and organize them easily into what best suits your project. It also offers more flexibility in website appearance. The Google interface is easy to use and get accustomed to.

⇨ **Challenges:** Setting up a Google Site requires a great deal of initial effort to organize and create the page, because very little is automatically generated. It also does not offer the detailed access capabilities that FMYI does. Users are given one of three status levels which determines their access and editing capabilities for the entire site. In addition, if members use Gmail or any other Google Applications, they will already have a Google ID. This would mean that when logging in to access your project website, they would also be logged into their personal accounts. This would create a possibility of members using host site resources inappropriately.

⇨ **Best for:** Situations where the site administrator is more familiar with setting up a website and team members are less familiar with social networking tools.

Zoho

⇨ **Address:** http://www.zoho.com

⇨ **The Basics:** Zoho offers a full family of applications similar to Google Applications. They have Zoho Projects as a specific project-planning tool (you are only allowed one free project website) as well as Zoho Wiki, which can be used to set up a page similar to a Google Site.

⇨ **Capabilities:** Zoho Projects offers a calendar, tasks lists, forums, and file storage. It is set up for a business project and so uses that language throughout. It also allows you to view tasks on a timeline.

⇨ **Benefits:** Zoho is set up similarly to Google and the interface is easy to use. Zoho Projects is also the only tool listed here that offers an easy to use calendar and timeline. It is also less likely that members will already be using Zoho, so the issue of using Google Sites appropriately is less likely to come up.

⇨ **Challenges:** Zoho Projects does not provide as easy of a framework for separating the information and tasks of a specific work group, although working through Zoho Wikis may alleviate that.

⇨ **Best for:** Using Zoho Projects would be easy for teams where the site administrator and/or members are not as familiar with Internet tools or setting up a website. Zoho Wikis would best be used by teams where people are more familiar with those tools.

Acrobat

⇨ **Address:** https://www.acrobat.com/

⇨ **The Basics:** Adobe Acrobat offers a range of online tools that can be used similarly to project planning tools, although it is not designed as such. It is designed to help you create, store, and share documents (including PDFs). It does require that users have a computer that has the Adobe Flash Player (available by free download).

⇨ **Capabilities:** Since it is not strictly a project planning tool, the capabilities of Acrobat are not the same as the tools listed above. However, it can be used to create, store, and share documents between groups of people. It also offers web-conferencing capabilities.

⇨ **Benefits:** Acrobat is extremely easy to use. It also has the added benefit of being able to create PDFs easily through Buzzword, their online word processor.

⇨ **Challenges:** Acrobat is not designed to help you organize a project with task lists and agendas.

⇨ **Best for:** Situations where your main goal is to share necessary documents as opposed to organizing the project online.